



**DRAFT**

**Town of Amherst  
PARKING GARAGE  
PROJECT JUSTIFICATION**

**March 1997**

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**Introduction**

Several parking studies undertaken since the 1970's have indicated that the parking supply was not adequate to meet the needs of those who try to use downtown Amherst, and cannot meet peak parking demands. Parking data gathered and analyzed by the Amherst Planning Department in 1996 and 1997 confirm this. Parking supply problems are most apparent in those areas of the downtown where demand is greatest, but are systemic. Since downtown Amherst is strongly confined by adjacent residential neighborhoods, any significant new parking supply must be provided in structures--decks and garages.

**PARKING DATA**

Parking data of three kinds has been gathered and analyzed:

**Gross Parking Demand**

The gross parking demand generated by all downtown uses in 1997 far exceeds the available parking supply. Similar analyses in 1977 and 1984 also showed deficits.

The downtown parking deficit has increased steadily over the past 20 years. The parking supply count has increased by only about 194 spaces during the same two decades. However, even this modest increase is largely the result of more accurate counts that include on-street parking in neighborhoods which abut the downtown.

Between 1977 and 1997, the Town of Amherst metered some previously un-metered on-street spaces, but built no new public parking spaces.

A conservative estimate of peak parking demand in downtown Amherst is, for the purposes of this analysis, considered to be a situation in which 3/4's of all downtown stores, restaurants and offices are operating at full capacity at the same time.

Table 1. Gross Parking Demand - 1977-1997

Year	Gross Demand	Existing Supply	Estimated Deficit
1977	1,655	1,467	188
1984	1,756	1,467	289
1997	2,601	1,661	940

Three-quarters of the theoretical gross parking demand (1,950 spaces) would, when compared to the existing supply, generate an overall deficit of 289 parking spaces for downtown Amherst during this estimate of 'peak' use.

#### Boltwood Walk Parking Demand

The greatest parking demand in downtown Amherst occurs in the Boltwood Walk area, an historic commercial block that includes the Center School Complex Urban Renewal Project. This block contains the densest concentration of municipal, commercial and residential uses in downtown Amherst. It generates the greatest parking demand and has the largest parking deficit, as follows:

861 spaces	Theoretical gross parking demand
<u>x .75</u>	
646 spaces	Estimated 'peak' demand
646 spaces	Estimated 'peak' demand
<u>- 207 spaces</u>	Total existing parking
439 spaces	Estimated unmet parking demand

It is for this reason, among others, that the Town is siting its first parking garage project in this block.

Nearby historic commercial blocks are less densely developed, and have much smaller parking deficits--the second largest deficit is in the CVS block's, at only 35 spaces. Areas in the north end of the downtown, which was built for the most part since the 1940's, have much less dense commercial development. A number of large private parking lots in that area generate localized parking surpluses, which account for the overall downtown parking deficit of 289 spaces (compared to the localized 439 space deficit in Boltwood Walk).

### Parking Counts

The Amherst Planning Department began taking selected parking counts in December 1996. Counts were also taken in January 1997 during intersession, and after the colleges and University were back in session in February and March 1997, to provide a broad sampling of parking levels and patterns.

December 1996 (holiday shopping season) - Counts show peak occupancies in both the Boltwood and CVS sites above 95%. Since 85% occupancy is considered to be "capacity," these counts show that there is not enough parking in these two areas of the downtown, which contain the largest concentrations of public parking.

January 1997 - Counts taken show that only the Boltwood site saw peak occupancies above 85%. Peak levels at the CVS and Amity sites in this traditionally quiet time were for the most part between 60%-70%.

February/March 1997 - Counts show peak occupancies in the Boltwood site regularly exceeded 90% and even 100%. Peak occupancies in the CVS site fluctuated between 80-90%. Peak occupancies in the Amity site ranged around 70%, with some peaks at or above 80%.

### Downtown Employee/Resident Parking

Downtown employees and residents represent the base level of downtown parking demand. As in most communities, downtown employees and residents are discouraged from competing with shoppers and visitors for public parking. But other parking must exist for them to use.

There are about 880 downtown employees and residents in the commercial areas of downtown Amherst. Only about 430 downtown parking spaces are dedicated to downtown employee or resident use, leaving as many as 450 people needing long-term parking (reduced by the number who walk or take public transportation).

There are 273 unmetered parking spaces on side streets around the downtown, which serve some downtown employees and residents. But these spaces are also used by residents of those side streets and by those who park downtown and take the bus to the university or elsewhere.

For reasons of site size, circulation, massing and cost, no garage on any of the potential parking facility sites in downtown Amherst will be able to generate enough net new parking spaces to meet this employee/resident parking need. The first garage Amherst builds could be filled the day it opens with the vehicles of downtown employees and residents.

## **ALTERNATIVES TO PARKING**

A necessary corollary to providing new parking supply is to take steps to reduce parking demand. This is usually done by encouraging the use of public transit, ride-sharing, specialized transit services and promoting alternative personal transportation.

**Public Transit** - Public transit has long been a high priority for Amherst, which participates with the University of Massachusetts and the Pioneer Valley Transit Authority (PVTA) in supporting one of the largest, most convenient and inexpensive public transit systems available to any community Amherst's size in the nation. And yet downtown parking demand remains high, and continues to grow.

**Specialized Transit Services** - Transit services like park-and-ride shuttles work well in urbanized areas with high populations and numerous large employers. Despite recent growth, Amherst and its downtown cannot yet support such services.

**Alternative Transportation** - Almost 50 new bicycle racks will be added downtown in the next 2-3 years, through a grant from the Pioneer Valley Transit Authority (PVTA). In the long-term, bicycle paths and/or lanes will be added to streets and intersections as they are improved. This will likely include a connection between the downtown and the Norwottuck Rail Trail, which shows promise as a potential east/west commuter link. Secure bicycle parking will be a feature of any downtown parking garage.

Public transit and alternative transportation improvements must and will be pursued. But these will not significantly reduce downtown parking demand or change people's driving habits within the foreseeable future.

### **Other Reasons for a Parking Garage**

**Limited Parking Limits Downtown Diversity** - The gross parking demand analysis has also highlighted changes in the evolving mix of downtown uses since 1984. The nature of these changes imply that a stagnant parking supply since 1977 has contributed to a

limited range of downtown shopping choices for Amherst residents.

Some uses, like retail stores, require adequate, convenient parking to survive. In downtown Amherst, they have been "selected against." The uses which now dominate the downtown can struggle along on a limited supply of parking--specialty "destination" stores, quality restaurants, coffee and pizza shops, and some professional offices. Some of their customers can walk downtown, take the bus, drive around looking for parking or park illegally and risk a parking ticket.

**Increased Parking Supports All Downtown Activities** - Traditionally, Amherst's downtown has provided a full range of community activities and services--shopping, dining, banking, medical and other professional services, the Post Office, the theater, the library, public safety facilities, a community center and other municipal services. Downtown is also a gathering place for religious and cultural events and shared community celebrations. As Amherst grows, the downtown parking supply must keep pace with the community's increasing need to use its downtown.

**Increased Parking Supports Needed Commercial Growth--Maintaining** Amherst's community character and public services in the face of population growth and change is expensive. The needs of the University of Massachusetts and the unusually high percentage of tax-exempt public lands in Amherst mean that residential property owners bear a heavy tax burden. Balancing that tax burden requires a more diverse local economy, including encouraging more commercial and mercantile activity.

Downtown Amherst is the traditional, logical place for local commerce to develop, grow and expand. Adequate parking is an essential part of the public infrastructure that supports commercial activity and growth, which in turn supports Amherst's public services--schools, library services, public safety, recreation, open space and conservation lands, and other important public programs.

### Downtown Pedestrian Environment

Since 1973, Amherst has invested hundreds of thousands of dollars in developing and planning Boltwood Walk (the Center School Complex Urban Renewal Project) as the downtown's principal pedestrian area--any proposed garage in this area must consider pedestrian design needs.

Other downtown streetscape improvements have been discussed and planned for decades. However, it was not until the 1992 Downtown Action Plan that downtown needs were comprehensively stated by the community and given a mechanism for action.

The Plan declares that downtown "should be planned and developed as an attractive, secure pedestrian environment . . . major and minor public open spaces strung together by a network of major pedestrian streetscapes and other pedestrian paths." It included many specific proposals for sidewalk and public open space improvements.

Many of these are already underway--several public open space projects (Sweetser Park, Town Common, West Cemetery), a new downtown wayfinding sign system, intersection and accessibility improvements, cost-sharing for downtown street furniture, permanent public arts installations, sidewalk redesign projects and others. Other improvements recommended in the Plan have been submitted for consideration and inclusion in the Town's capital budget for future years.

But the Downtown Action Plan addresses downtown needs comprehensively, and it also stresses the need for improved parking:

*"Downtown Amherst is primarily a pedestrian area. It is served by a mass transit system that is unusually extensive and inexpensive for a community this size. Nonetheless, the vast majority of people coming downtown use their own cars. This cannot be expected to change until fundamental changes are made in federal and state transportation policy. For the foreseeable future, adequate parking for private vehicles will continue to be an essential element of the downtown.*

*In fact, the vitality of the downtown area depends upon an ample supply of parking that is easy to find, and within easy walking distance of shopping and major downtown destinations. Retail uses are particularly dependent on nearby parking for their survival and success. Drivers must be able to find a space quickly and easily. This includes the constant stream of visitors to the colleges and tourists who have never been in Amherst before, as well as the many local residents who have no extra time to spend circling around looking for an open parking space.*

*The parking system must accommodate and encourage reasonable visit times by parkers, and must discourage misuse and abuse. Finally, the available supply of parking must keep up with demand."*